



Office of the President

December 3, 2020

Mr. Chris Kolb
State Budget Director
111 South Capitol
P.O. Box 30026
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Director Kolb:

As the world continues to navigate the turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses, nonprofit organizations and governments are looking to their leaders for a path forward. And at Central Michigan University, we are preparing flexible, adaptable, service-minded leaders to participate as engaged citizens in an increasingly global society.

Many are calling 2020 the “year of the great pivot” in higher education, and it feels an apropos description. Each week, we adapt to the new challenges posed by COVID-19, and each week, we put the needs and the success of our students *first*. It is worth noting that ***CMU never ceased operations and continued our vital mission of education, research and service without pause throughout the pandemic*** — including nearly an entire semester of on-campus, in-person instruction for students who prefer this modality, as well as many other flexible options for students. We have adjusted how we deliver instruction as well as co-curricular student programs, services and support. We continue to offer our students safe residential experiences, outstanding educational opportunities and individualized services and support to enable them to remain on the path to degree attainment.

None of this has been easy. Students, faculty and staff are all feeling the strain of the extended pandemic. Mental health issues are on the rise from isolation and lack of social activities. Limits on gathering sizes posed unique challenges for student activities and forced changes in the types of research and creative endeavors students and faculty engaged in throughout the year. Study abroad experiences were canceled, and many employers limited or canceled internship experiences vital to career exploration and development.

Yet, despite many challenges, the hard work and dedication of our students, faculty and staff enabled us to complete nearly the entire fall semester on campus while mitigating the spread of the virus within our community.

The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated the need to move much more quickly to plan for CMU’s future. Late in 2019, we began in earnest our strategic envisioning process, designed to help us plan for CMU’s success in 2030 and beyond. Now, instead of looking to 2030, we have expedited the timeline for this process and are adapting to plan for success in 2021.

The fiscal realities of declining enrollment and the negative impact of COVID-19 have made all of this far more challenging. In spite of this, CMU **did not raise tuition or institute any new fees** related to expenses of COVID-19. Instead, following a budget review process in the first half of the year, CMU made budget reductions across all areas of the university over the summer. This resulted in closing or reducing some programs and services and loss of valuable personnel. While these cuts were made in line with our strategic priorities, they certainly limited the scope of what is possible and attainable for the future.

Making truly creative and innovative changes to our operations to meet the needs of our stakeholders — including students, families, employers, community partners, local and state leaders and more — requires resources. Now more than ever, we rely on our state partners for support to continue our vital educational, research and service mission. We are educating and developing the leaders of tomorrow, and we need your partnership now to continue this important work.

In this document, I have outlined some of the changes we have faced — and will continue to face — as well as the opportunities we have to grow into a stronger institution. I appreciate this opportunity to share the story of Central Michigan University with you.

Be well,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "R. O. Davies", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Robert O. Davies, Ph.D.
President

1) Please describe some of the obstacles or challenges you have faced while operating in a fully (or at least partially) remote environment.

Again, CMU did not cease operations at any point during the pandemic. CMU's Emergency Management Team has met regularly throughout the pandemic, developing a plan to keep students, faculty and staff safe while allowing university operations to continue. Our housing facilities remained open for those who need a safe place to live, and we've continued to provide access to food, high-speed internet and support services to help students focus on their educational journeys.

In the spring of 2020, CMU shifted to remote instruction during the early stages of the pandemic. This transition identified many challenges we continue to address now.

University leadership and employees continued to work on campus throughout the pandemic while many areas were de-densified, encouraging staff who could effectively work from home to do so. In doing so, many employees were forced to balance working from home with household commitments, especially those with younger children unable to attend school in person and those who care for elderly parents.

In the early stages of COVID-19, many other countries experienced spikes in positive cases. CMU reached out to students who were studying abroad to ensure they were safe and to assist in getting them home as quickly and safely as possible. Simultaneously, CMU canceled study abroad trips that were scheduled over spring break. These actions were met with disappointment, yet CMU offered high levels of clear communication and support to returning students.

The shift to remote classes for the remainder of the spring semester quickly highlighted many issues, including:

- Inconsistent access to high-speed internet for many students, faculty and staff. Many individuals living in rural areas spent additional time finding a solution, often resulting in travel to areas with stable Wi-Fi connections. The lack of high-speed internet throughout the state is a major obstacle when teaching, learning and support services are forced into a remote environment.
- Many faculty members were unfamiliar with teaching in a remote environment.
- Traditional face-to-face instruction methods often do not transition effectively to remote instruction, requiring the need to quickly develop a [Learning Continuity](#) website. Faculty, staff and administration worked tirelessly to enhance course content and support students and faculty who were new to remote learning and remote instruction.

As CMU prepared for summer and fall classes, additional course modalities were added to better serve students and reduce classroom density. This required additional investment in technology, including cameras, audiovisual equipment and other computer equipment to allow for a [HyFlex](#) model of instruction. This new model of instruction had challenges early on as faculty and students navigated in this new way of teaching and learning, but overall, this model has been well-received. In addition to HyFlex instruction, courses also occurred online (both synchronous and asynchronous), in a hybrid format, and a small percentage of courses — less than 2 percent — were solely held in a face-to-face environment (primarily labs and courses with specialized equipment.)

Mental health and overall well-being of our entire campus community also are major concerns caused by the uncertainty of COVID-19. CMU has responded by providing remote support services such as counseling and advising. Our CARE Team also regularly reviews reports submitted by faculty, staff or students who feel someone is in need of support; however, with students spread throughout the country, this has proven much more challenging than in a face-to-face environment on campus.

The ongoing uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 also causes many financial challenges for students and their families. Many Michigan families have been forced to evaluate their ability to afford college while facing the reality that one or more people in their family may be out of work. In response, **CMU was the first public institution in the state to freeze tuition rates for the 2020-21 academic year and defer payment deadlines.** Five public institutions in the state followed suit and froze tuition, while the remaining nine chose to increase undergraduate tuition between 1.83% and 4.24%.

The admissions process of recruiting and onboarding students also has proven very challenging due to COVID-19. CMU's admissions team cannot visit high schools, and large-scale on-campus recruitment and orientation events had to be reimagined. Many students chose to defer their fall start date because of the uncertainty.

Due to uncertainty surrounding enrollment, the inability of international students to travel to pursue an education, and the impact of COVID-19, CMU was forced to significantly reduce its budget to align with our anticipated revenue stream. This required many difficult decisions, including position eliminations and employee layoffs. Layoffs impact our employees, their families, CMU, our local community and the state's economy.

The final challenge I will discuss relates to the student experience, which is critical for students to feel a greater sense of belonging at CMU. Learning is not limited to the classroom, and campus experiences are often the memories that last a lifetime for students. The task of building a sense of community in an all-virtual environment has been an exciting, albeit often overwhelming, challenge for our student support areas, including our services for first-generation, multicultural, LGBTQ+ and other often-marginalized groups of students.

And, while we have held many virtual events throughout this pandemic, none of them could replace meaningful experiences such as studying abroad; volunteering in communities across the state and nation through our Alternative Breaks program; internships; concerts and performances on campus; sporting events; student research opportunities; and most importantly, commencement ceremonies.

2) What has worked particularly well for you under these remote conditions?

Faculty, staff and administrators continue their drive to adapt to changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. CMU's Emergency Management Team continues to focus its efforts on mitigating the spread of COVID-19 on our campus and in the greater community. Earlier this year, the team implemented numerous strategies across campus to enhance safety for CMU students, faculty and staff. As new executive orders were announced, CMU adapted its plans quickly to fulfill all requirements set forth in each order and continues to follow U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines throughout the pandemic. In the spring, the university launched its Fired Up for Fall website with numerous resources and key guidance for a successful fall semester. This has recently been updated to the [Fired Up for Spring](#) site, which also outlines [specific mitigation strategies](#).

When reliable testing became available, CMU developed clear guidance and resources for students, faculty and staff regarding COVID-19 testing and surveillance testing. The university also then opened a testing center on campus to minimize the need for students, faculty and staff to find an outside provider. CMU requires all students, faculty and staff to self-report daily if they have any symptoms associated with COVID-19 or have been in contact with anyone who tested positive for the virus. This is done through a [mobile application](#) developed by CMU's Office of Information Technology. Also, CMU repurposed one of our residence halls as a quarantine hall. This space provided a safe environment throughout the semester for on-campus students who tested positive or were in close contact with someone who tested positive and needed to isolate or quarantine.

As I discussed earlier, CMU did not cease operations during the pandemic. The plans detailed above allowed students to live in the residence halls and local community with access to high-speed internet, support services and additional safe spaces on campus to study. Each academic building converted spaces to allow for quiet socially distanced study spaces. Students, faculty, staff and administration have taken COVID-19 very seriously, thus we have been able to limit the spread.

Our students continue to share their appreciation for face-to-face instruction options and our new [HyFlex](#) learning option. Many students do not learn well with remote and/or online instruction, and having flexible options for our students afforded us a successful fall semester.

CMU has a strong working relationship with the local community, including city and county officials, business owners and community organizations — we are all in this together and support one another to do what is best for our local community and CMU. Members of CMU's Emergency Management Team meet at least once a week with these local leaders to discuss the current situation and issues we may need to address together. The development of a CMU contact tracing team to assist our local health department, led by CMU faculty and staff and staffed by CMU students studying public health, is a great example.

CMU keeps student success top of mind as we develop and implement changes throughout this pandemic. A few examples include:

- Quickly securing and installing HyFlex equipment in over 350 classrooms on our main campus and in learning centers around the state to allow more flexibility to students.
- Refurbishing a pool of laptops that students can check out.
- Development of a [Learning Continuity](#) website, providing faculty with many self-serve options at their fingertips as they reimagine remote instruction in ways that fulfilled student learning outcomes.
- Building in safety nets for students, such as the ability to change their course grading method to credit/no credit later in the semester, to promote successful course completion and prevent loss of financial aid or scholarships.

CMU embraced technology very quickly during the pandemic. Faculty, staff and administrators who were not familiar with platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Webex are now avid users. Technology allows for greater employee flexibility for those taking care of loved ones and who cannot physically be on campus at all times. The pandemic will likely cause institutions to rethink business practices such as hours of operation and telecommuting agreements.

We continue to reflect on what worked well over the 2020 calendar year and identify areas for improvement. As I've said many times before, there is no manual or playbook for how to respond to a global pandemic. Yet, CMU has adapted well overall through these times of uncertainty. We will face additional challenges ahead, but our determination, resiliency and passion for doing what is best for students will help us succeed.

3) What strategies or programs has your institution employed to help us in achieving the governor's goal of having 60% of Michiganders with a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2030?

CMU is mindful of the governor's goal and the needs of employers across the state. The governor's goal requires that institutions truly understand the unique needs of our current and future student population. We are currently wrapping up our first year of strategic envisioning — a plan for what CMU should look like as an institution over the next 10 years. The strategic envisioning process is founded on the principles of rigor, relevance and excellence in our educational offerings.

One of our strategic pathways focuses specifically on rethinking and expanding our educational offerings to partner with individuals and organizations to advance lifelong learning and career development goals.

CMU offers unique degree completion programs, certificates and micro-credentials as options for students to enhance their education. Recently earmarked funds will ensure offerings in this area continue to grow. Faculty, staff and corporate partners are working together to identify areas where learning gaps currently exist between the needs of our state and its residents. I am proud that CMU is a leader in this important market segment.

Another strategic pathway focuses on understanding the needs of current and future students, specifically access, flexibility and value.

CMU is committed to making higher education accessible to students across the state. In addition to our main campus in Mount Pleasant, CMU learning centers exist in eight locations across the state — Clinton Township, Dearborn, East Lansing, Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Southfield, Traverse City and Troy — and we have a dedicated outreach office in downtown Detroit. CMU also is a leader in the state with respect to online educational offerings, with a rich history in delivering distance education. Students need flexibility in the modality of their educational programs, and our goal is for students to have a seamless transition in modalities when life changes occur. The [HyFlex](#) equipment recently installed in over 350 classrooms on our main campus and in learning centers around the state positions CMU well to reach this goal.

Opportunities for transfer students also are critically important. CMU recently revised its transfer policies to allow for a more seamless transition to CMU, an effort [recently recognized for its innovation](#) by the Michigan Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. CMU has many articulation agreements with community colleges and actively participates in the MiTransfer Pathways Initiative, as well. A unique partnership with Mid Michigan College through the Chippewa Achieve Program allows MMC students to live in CMU residential housing, identify a route for transferring to CMU and leverage campus resources to help them along their educational journey.

CMU's educational programs and credentials provide students with significant value based on tuition price and the opportunities available for students.

- CMU's undergraduate tuition rates currently rank 11th of the 15 public four-year institutions in the state. Over the past 10 years, CMU has the lowest cumulative tuition increase of any public four-year institution in the state.
- Roughly 85% of all CMU students receive some type of financial aid or scholarships. CMU recently announced a new scholarship fund for adult learners, as well.

All of the items noted above align well with helping the state achieve the governor's goal of having 60% of Michiganders with a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2030.

4) In what ways can the state continue to support your institution, given the present fiscal constraints we are all facing?

CMU understands that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause stress and uncertainty for our students and their families, our employees, our community, the state of Michigan, the nation and the world. At CMU, we continually adapt based on our current situation and plan for future obstacles whenever possible.

We are committed to doing what is best for our students and their families by:

- Providing them greater certainty in such unprecedented times.
- Making tough decisions like freezing tuition this year and postponing payment deadlines to ease the burden on our students and their families.
- Implementing new learning platforms such as HyFlex, and keeping our campus safe so students who need face-to-face instruction can receive it rather than simply transition to remote learning.

All of these decisions have financial consequences, including significant budget reductions and continually doing more with less. As we continue to provide greater certainty for our students and their families, **we ask you to provide greater certainty that you will invest in higher education** with an increase in state support that, at a minimum, aligns with inflation rates outlined by the Higher Education Price Index.

The disparity of state appropriations hinders innovation among the institutions receiving lower levels of appropriations compared to their in-state peers and perpetuates funding largely based on historical political influence that occurred prior to term limits. CMU's closest peer institution in the state currently receives nearly \$23 million more in state funding, **yet our undergraduate tuition rates are lower**. The current tuition restraint language also treats institutions that raise tuition to the tuition restraint cap the same as those who stay far under the cap. Institutions with historically low tuition increases, such as CMU, are not being rewarded for doing so.

Over the past 10 years, CMU has the lowest cumulative tuition increase of any public four-year institution in the state. **We ask that institutions with a continued commitment to access and affordability be recognized in a formula for allocating state appropriations.**

The state did not ask for capital outlay requests this year due to the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19. While we understand this position, we are hopeful that capital outlay funding will be available in future years. As revenue consensus figures become clearer this year, **we encourage the state to establish a deferred maintenance pool for universities.** Deferred maintenance is a significant liability for many Michigan institutions, and internal budget reductions leave fewer funds available for this important purpose. A state funding pool for deferred maintenance would directly benefit the state's economy by investing in infrastructure that ensures jobs for construction companies across the state.

Each year, the appropriations act also adds new reporting requirements for institutions in state boilerplate reporting. CMU believes in accountability and transparency, but each report added takes time and effort of our employees who are already being asked to do more with less due to budget reductions and increased workload. We ask that the state look internally at current data sources such as HEIDI and leverage federal data sources such as IPEDS before inserting new requirements that could be largely redundant.

CMU primarily serves students from the state of Michigan. We enroll students from almost every county in Michigan, and nearly 90% of on-campus students are from Michigan. Historically, about 70% of CMU graduates choose to live and work in Michigan. More than 145,000 CMU alumni currently reside in Michigan and significantly contribute to the state's economy. Our alumni are leaders in their communities and genuinely care about the betterment of our state. We believe this information is extremely relevant as the state moves into budget development for the new year.

Central Michigan University looks forward to continuing our important partnership with the state of Michigan and participating in future discussions regarding funding allocation methods to further the educational goals of our state.